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U.S. image slips in Europe; poll's political potential iffy

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Leaked reports of a U.S. Government-sponsored poll showing a decline in American prestige among West Europeans are almost certain to be used by Jimmy Carter in the closing days of this campaign against President Ford.

But analysis of the reasons given for the shifts in European attitudes make it hard to draw sweeping conclusions as to whether Ford administration policies — or any other single cause — are to blame for the lessened esteem for the United States.

According to officials familiar with the poll, conducted under the auspices of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), the reasons for changing attitudes cited by respondents to the survey are highly fragmented. In answer to one question, for instance, 15 different reasons for a shift are given by those surveyed.

The changes, moreover, are part of a long-range trend showing a decline in U.S. prestige going back to the 1960s and America's involvement in the Vietnam war.

There are also some contradictions involved in the poll's findings. For example, a majority

or near-majority of those surveyed showed confidence in America's democratic processes and the country's ability to deal with its domestic problems.

There was no discernible increase in those who held a bad opinion of the United States. The notable shift was from a good opinion to a neutral or "undecided" view. The poll is taken about every three years.

This finding was in contrast with reports from U.S. embassies in Western Europe showing a rise in the standing of the United States in the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate periods among so-called intellectuals, or persons involved in government work, the news media, or universities.

Preliminary analysis of the USIA-sponsored poll was leaked to reporters by persons sympathetic to Governor Carter. The polling was done in July and August.

Some of the reasons given for shifts from a positive attitude toward the United States to a more neutral one were Watergate, crime, racial problems, the CIA disclosures, social and economic conditions, inflation, and a drawback from responsibilities. The countries surveyed were Britain, France, Italy, and West Germany.

[USIA sources said data was still being analyzed and they could not release details of the raw results, a Reuter dispatch said.

[They said this year's poll would be published after analysis is completed.

[They said that two groups of analysts had been given the raw data but came to somewhat differing views and that officials now are trying to reconcile them.

[The sources said the poll was taken as a "rider" to surveys being conducted by U.S. polling organizations on other topics.

[Although overall favorable opinion about the United States had declined, Europeans were generally affirmative when asked if they thought the democratic process was functioning in the United States and if the country could solve its own problems.]